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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the current crisis in reading ability decline in British primary schools and how modern language teaching methods are remedying this crisis, specifically the problems in exam and syllabus design. It is suggested that the juxtaposition of phonic and psycholinguistic methods in teaching reading are the root of the continuing question of primacy of structure and meaning. In addition, casual reading may not be a normal pastime of modern students, they may be given insufficient time for reading lessons, and they may not be taught how to read in the first place. Texts used for reading may not allow the full development of comprehension skills. A more refined teaching approach to reading is presented in which reading is based on the type of reading that learners should be doing and when and how, rather than organized around a multitude of activities and exercises. The practical application of reading in the modern languages classroom is discussed, in particular, ways of reading and the content and form of a modern languages program. (Contains 18 references.) (NAV)

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Reading and Communication in the Modern Language Classroom

Michael Grenfell

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Reading and Communication in the Modern Languages Classroom

Michael Grenfell

Introduction

In the summer of 1990 a new crisis in education hit the headlines of the national press. Standards were falling! - in particular, reading standards. The main source of this news was the publication of the pamphlet *Sponsored Reading Failure* by the psychologist Martin Turner. The report (Turner 1990) claimed that there had been a significant fall in the reading scores of seven and eight year-olds in a number of Local Education Authorities. This news was controversial enough to cause a stir, but behind the headlines lay a potentially more contentious issue: simply why, if true, was this the case? The evidence presented in the report was hardly conclusive. Even so, reading quickly became the focus for a debate on the nature and style of teaching itself.

It is certainly true that reading has traditionally held a unique status in education. A child's reading age is often used as a measure of intelligence, or at least intellectual development. Similarly, much credence is given to HMI reports which suggest that children who are not capable readers by the age of seven are likely to experience learning difficulties later on in their school life. Reading, then, is often equated with the processes of learning themselves; the ease or difficulty experienced in each somehow running in parallel. The potential for this to become a full-blown debate on the quality of our schools, and the teaching in them, was therefore enormous. Yet, if reading has had such a high profile in the hearts and minds of journalists, educationalists and the public at large, its significance and role in the teaching of modern foreign languages has curiously been quite the reverse. Of the "four skills" it is probably the one that is the most often overlooked, the most taken for granted. Reading is regarded at best as a passive skill. Similarly, reading is seen as a "filler" for times when the teacher is not in the classroom, or reading exercises are mostly used as comprehension tests.

In this paper I want to begin by setting out some of the issues underlying the recent "reading crisis" in British schools and link them with the types of "communicative techniques" we are currently developing in modern languages teaching. By doing this, I want to highlight some of the problems we are experiencing in exam and syllabus design, and to use reading as a focus for suggesting a more refined teaching approach. The second part of this paper will then give a more detailed consideration of the practical application of reading in the modern languages classroom; in particular, ways of reading and the content and form of a modern languages reading programme.

Reading and communication

Central to the report on reading failure cited earlier (Turner 1990) is a clear criticism of the style of methodology in teaching reading; in particular, the belief that the beginning of the fall in reading scores coincided with the growth in newer, unstructured methods. The main "culprit" here, it seems, is the spread of "Real Books", and the consequent approaches to teaching children to read. Real books probably have no single coherent theory behind them, although generally a psycholinguistic angle is taken, which emphasises the relationships children form with books when reading them. Children are expected to use contexts and clues from their reading in "making sense" of texts.

In this, what the child brings to the books - experiences, thoughts and emotions - are all important. Reading is consequently built up in the same way that speaking develops, with the child gaining increasing competence at his/her own pace. It is often referred to as an "apprenticeship". The "real books method", if there is one, is normally opposed to "phonics". Here children learn by matching sounds to combinations of letters. Each word is, therefore, a cluster of sound and letter combinations which are built up to make sense of words, phrases and sentences. Each of these is therefore decoded by children by applying the phonic rules they have learnt. This systematic and structured teaching of letters, words, etc. is widely regarded as being more traditional; particularly by those concerned with working towards a more general reform of "progressive"

developments in teaching in schools. "The way I see it, teaching reading is phonics. Phonics is teaching reading. The rest is practice", so claimed Mona McNee, secretary of the Reading Reform Foundation. (*TES* 5.10.90 - "Reading reformers long for the old ways").

A similar confrontational debate, quieter perhaps but no less controversial, has surrounded the teaching of modern foreign languages; namely a structural (grammar) versus a psycholinguistic (communicative) approach. On the one hand, there exists a method which views the learning of a language as a gradual accumulation of a series of structural building blocks, on the other, a holistic approach based around making sense of and in the language, of contextualised response and personal meaning. It is a moot point whether either of these polarised methods exist in their pure form in first or second language learning. However, there are clearly issues here that strike at the fundamentals of what we understand language and language learning to be. With this in mind, I now want to set out the ways I believe modern approaches to foreign language teaching have been interpreted and show how this has downgraded the importance of reading in learning languages.

Most syllabuses, course books and assessment schemes are now avowedly "communicative". Yet the term itself is problematic (Grenfell 1991). CILT Information Sheet No. 12 (CILT 1989) lists 10 key principles for the communicative classroom:

1) Intention to mean
2) Information gap
3) Personalisation
4) Unpredictability
5) Legitimacy
6) Target language use
7) Approach to error
8) Authenticity
9) Speech v. writing
10) Practice v. real language

If we take the "four skills" - writing, reading, speaking and listening - as a basis for teaching languages, it is likely, although by no means inevitable, that following such principles will lead to a predominance of oral/aural activities over reading and writing. In this case, speech, both spoken and heard, will be the main medium for classroom teaching. So, intention to mean, information gap, personalisation, unpredictability, target language

use, approach to error are all most easily interpreted in activities where learners talk and listen. This is one reason why oral work in the target language has become the dominant feature of language teaching in a GCSE world. Another may be simply a reaction against O-level, with its overt emphasis on grammar work and translation. It is also a question of being pragmatic; the would be pupil-as-tourist will need to get by in a foreign country - he/she will be unable to do this without reasonable oral proficiency. However, behind this feature of oral dominance lie other methodological and theoretical assumptions; most notably, perhaps, that language is best learnt through exposure to it. This "understanding" has probably filtered down to language classrooms through the influence of such writers as Stephen Krashen, with his insistence on comprehensible input and the distinction he popularised between learning and acquisition (Krashen 1981, 1982). In his model, learning grammar is at best an adjunct to real language acquisition, which mostly takes place through the absorption and production of as much language as possible. Again, it is assumed that adopting this perspective on language learning and teaching will require mostly oral/aural proficiency, and thus speaking and listening remain the major classroom activities.

GCSE

I would argue that it is precisely this assumption that has shaped the GCSE classroom, and that the four skills therefore are not treated with equal status. Typical practice is most likely to consist of speaking and listening in tandem for main teaching purposes, with writing activities as back-up and consolidation exercises where necessary. Reading is then regarded as complementary, particularly in testing comprehension. Ironically, however, this is to put the emphasis of work on possibly the most demanding areas of language learning. Listening to foreign languages is notoriously difficult and tiring, even for the most able. Yet, the reality is that we expect learners to do this every day, and to pick out specific points of information in the course of doing so. Surely, nothing is more likely to build up a wall of incomprehension, or defeat the learner, than insisting on identifying semantic details. The problem of losing the gist, panicking or switching off is therefore chronic. Similarly, the kind of language encountered

during the standard type of role play gives little opportunity for the focus on sense and meaning necessary for semantic and syntactic information to become apparent to the learner. It is often possible, given the required tasks, for the learner to run through them in a manner that allows him/her to be oblivious to what the other partner in the conversation is saying. So when a task states: "ask for 500 grammes of cheese and four apples", and the teacher, in order to "extend" pupils, asks "which cheese?", it is not uncommon for a pupil, in reply to the first question, to simply go on to the next - "and four apples". Clearly, there is no personalisation of language in such exchanges, so it is unsurprising if these exercises yield poor results as learning activities. In order for learners to learn language they must make sense. This means production of language in a creative, goal directed manner. It also means taking on board language as the basis of an individualised response. I find it difficult to believe that this is the case with the type of speaking/listening activities so apparent in many language learning classrooms to-day. It is not my intention, in the present context, to repeat ideas concerning reshaping oral/aural work along more process-based lines (Grenfell 1991), neither am I suggesting that the spoken word is not important in language learning. My intention rather is to discuss the place that reading might have in an enhanced form of communicative language teaching.

I have suggested that reading must have a more central role to play in learning languages. A cursory glance at any standard course book reveals the lack of attention paid to it; what does exist tends to be of a fairly literal comprehension kind. This seems to be a symptom of GCSE teaching with all its emphasis on pupil-as-tourist language. The National Criteria for GCSE make this clear:

> Basic Reading - Candidates should be expected ... to demonstrate understanding of public notices and signs (e.g. menus, timetables, advertisements) and the ability to extract relevant specific information from such texts as simple brochures, guides, letters and forms of imaginative writing considered to be within the experience of, and reflecting the interests of, sixteen year-olds. (DES 1985: 2)

The word "imaginative" is clearly problematic here, as the criteria have

been mostly taken by exam boards to mean lots of timetables, posters, newsclips, etc. So, a hotel advertisement is invariably followed by such standard type questions as:

a) What is the cost of the dearest room with meals?

b) When is it closed?

c) Why is it suitable for children?

(SEG 1989, General and Extended Reading: 6)

It is hard to see the place of imagination in this style of work.

Higher level reading does not fare much better. In addition to basic skills, candidates are expected to "demonstrate the ability to identify the important points or themes within an extended piece of writing and draw conclusions from, and see relations within, an extended text" (DES 1985: 3). Here is an example of how this has been translated into practice:

> Au 55 de la rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, le Père Noel, traditionnellement, descend avec quelques jours d'avance sur sa visite du 25 décembre. Mercredi dernier, il était, comme chaque année, fidèle au rendez-vous de l'Elysée.
>
> Dans la cour du Palais Présidentiel cinq cent enfants heureux l'attendaient. Vers cinq heures des personnages en costume blanc arrivèrent et, enveloppés dans des nuages de fumée bleus, blancs et rouges, donnèrent aux petits invités du Président et de Mme François Mitterand un concert de saxophones.
>
> a) Who lives at 55 rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré? (1 mark)
>
> b) Say when the event usually takes place. (1 mark)
>
> c) Describe the appearance of the saxophone players. (3 marks)
>
> (SEG, 1988 : 2: Extended Reading)

Three more paragraphs continue in the same vein; with questions chronologically placed, and depending on specific semantic equivalents to test comprehension. In this case, pupils need to "know" the meaning of "quelques jours d'avance", "L'Elysée" (although they get another clue with Palais Présidentiel), and "en costume blanc... enveloppés dans les

nuages de fumée bleus, blancs et rouges". As an aside, we may well ask just how the three marks available for the last question are divided up? Although it need not have been the case, reading is here treated as a sophisticated form of vocabulary test. I am not claiming that it is always so in every GCSE exam paper, but generally this approach is the predominant one. Publishers have followed the same lines, and have exacerbated the situation, with books which essentially deal with reading as an information-seeking activity. *Orientierung*, *Porte Ouverte* and *Points Cardinaux* are all good examples of this. It is as if speaking and writing have become limited to the transactional, to the giving and receiving of information, and reading has become literal information retrieval: but this is a very one-dimensional way of looking at reading, very narrow in its application and uses. It is symptomatic of the limited view of sense and meaning apparent in interpreting methodological approaches to language teaching in our GCSE world.

Reasons for reading

Despite these trends, it remains difficult to understand fully the current downgrading in status of reading in language teaching. It is, after all, the least inhibiting of the four skills; the most comfortable to work with. Pupils can work at their own pace, reading, re-reading, checking, and responding with their own thought patterns. At the very least, this frees lessons from over-domination by the teacher. Reading for the individual, therefore, can play a more significant role in creating independence for language learners. Recent work on autonomy and language learning (CILT 1990) suggests that the true essence of communication can only be developed in learners when they take charge of their own language, when they own it for themselves. This is clearly not the case in the vast majority of transactional discourses set up in teacher-dominated classrooms. Reading activities, in contrast, allow learners to work within their own linguistic world; they can encourage reflection within a wide range of texts, with or without visual support. The teacher can be freed to give help, either to individuals or groups, if more collaborative work is organised.

The significance of reading in modern language learning is not simply a question of pragmatics and classroom management. Even if we take an

uncritical view of Krashen's theories on language acquisition, it is clearly the case that reading is an important source of linguistic exposure. In reviewing the research literature on reading and writing, Krashen (1984) suggests that the former is an excellent source of comprehensible input to aid acquisition. In this case, reading is valuable because it helps familiarisation with basic structural and syntactic features of language. But in order for this to occur, readers must engage with a text at various levels of meaning, from the literal to the more sophisticated areas of personal response. So, despite the formal problems that Krashen has had in presenting his model of language learning, there is, central to it, the creation of sense and meaning for learners on the way to improving their linguistic competence. Reading has an obvious part to play in this. The importance of making personal sense is also central to the views of the psycholinguist Vygotsky. He developed the theme of "inner speech" (Vygotsky 1986 : 32/33) as that language which is created for oneself in making sense in language and thought. It is not overt speech, which is invariably shared with someone, but speech-for-oneself. It is speech connected to contexts and emotional responses, and requires the minimum linguistic information in forming thought processes. The emphasis is on a personal linguistic world which is accessed during the process of its growth and development. The major trend of giving and asking for speech in language lessons is therefore not enough. This language must be converted and processed in inner speech, as it is here that language is integrated and forms part of the learners' personal knowledge, about themselves and their environment. There is then some theoretical justification for believing that personal sense is a crucial part of effective language learning, and that reading can be particularly helpful in encouraging it.

Reading problems

There are clearly many problems in re-introducing reading into the modern languages classroom. It must firstly be recognised that casual reading itself may not be the normal pastime of pupils. In this case, they may be locked in the vicious circle (Nuttall 1982: 167) of not reading much, because slow reading and lack of comprehension reduce enjoyment of reading, which

results in lack of reading, and so on and so forth. This is clearly a positive disincentive to developing good reading habits. Choice of text is therefore crucial. The level of language vocabulary and structure must match that of the pupil. Similarly, the subject content of the text must be matched to the pupil. A pupil may have a very low reading age in the language but can have a much higher interest level. It is hence a problem to find texts of a suitable linguistic complexity with appropriate sophistication of ideas. Secondly, insufficient time is often given over to reading in lessons: it is considered to be a "filler" activity. A third problem is that pupils are not always "taught" to read. There are a number of approaches and strategies to adopt when reading a text, and it is important that the pupils are aware of these when reading; in other words, to know why and how they should be reading. If these problems can be addressed, the result should be to break the vicious circle I referred to earlier, to move from a situation of non-reading to a position where more reading is done because it is enjoyable, and because it is enjoyable, readers read faster and understand more. The condition for this is that pupils must feel involved with what they are reading, must feel that they interact with the text in a manner which engages them.

Dimensions of reading

I argued before that a lot of GCSE-influenced language teaching was based on literal comprehension; employing the basic strategies of skimming and scanning for information details. Yet writers on reading have long since identified other comprehension skills. The Barrett taxonomy (Chapman et al. 1977: 158/159) lists five basic dimensions to reading: Literal - Reorganisation - Inferential Comprehension - Evaluation - Appreciation. Each of these is broken down into some thirty plus sub-categories. I do not intend to go into the finer details of these. Implicit in the taxonomy, however, is a move from the literal towards the more affective. Reorganisation is simply classifying, outlining and summarising given reading material, whilst inferential comprehension involves more intuitive and personal experiences in order to conjecture and hypothesize about character(s) and content. Similarly, judgements of fact or fiction and appropriate worth are found in the evaluative, whilst appreciation requires

more personal, emotional responses from the reader. It is easy to see how these "higher" levels of reading skills are almost totally absent in our GCSE modern languages texts and syllabuses. Texts are simply not provided which allow the full development of comprehension skills, and, coincidental with this, teaching of the necessary reading skills and strategies. Such skills would include intensive and extensive reading, the correct questioning or approach to texts to make the most out of them and the ability to respond to information in the appropriate manner.

Reading processes

Many books (Grellet 1981; Salimbene 1986; Swarbrick 1990) now offer a variety of text attack activities for use in the classroom. They range from basic skimming, scanning techniques with simple box ticking exercises to activities designed to develop preference and appreciation of textual material. Some writers (Council of Europe 1988) find it convenient to link these activities under the heading of Pre-, During and Post-reading exercises. However, I feel that it is necessary to provide a clearer rationale for the way the types of activities can be linked to the stage pupils have attained in language learning. In other words, a reading policy needs to be based on the type of reading learners should be doing and when and how, rather than organised around a multitude of activities and exercises.

Figure 1

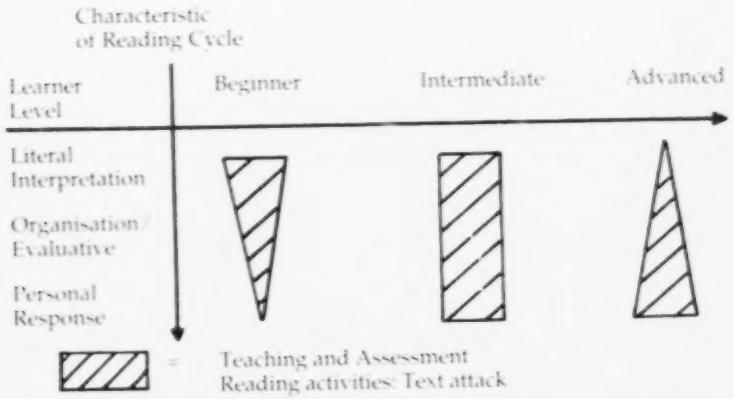

Figure 1 shows the outline of a simple scheme for developing a reading policy within a school curriculum. It is based around three cycles, moving from the literal levels of meaning to the more sophisticated levels of reader response. It assumes that most learners need to start at a literal level, matching sounds and sense to graphic representations. Here simple writing and vocabulary learning techniques are extremely useful, for example, look - cover - write - check, as are word games and general dictionary skills. At the other extreme, personal response moves into the whole area of individual affective reactions and imagination. The middle cycle includes both organisation and evaluation activities such as reordering paragraphs of texts, titling them, visual representations, filling in diagrams, or judgements of authenticity, appropriateness, etc., etc. The point I am making is that none of these cycles should represent just another list of teaching activities. Rather, the latter need to be thought of in terms of the stages of language learning processes. I have added Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced in order to signify that all three cycles should be included in the various learning stages. Therefore, it is important that "higher" (Cycle 3) reading activities be included as soon as possible in the beginners' reading experiences. Similarly, with advanced work (e.g. A-level), it will be necessary to include "lower" level activities in order to make the text more accessible to readers, as a way to aiding individual response. The blocked triangles and rectangle are an attempt to give a diagrammatic representation of the way the type of text activity will evolve in the course of increasing competence in the language. Of course, the sharp ends of the triangle are only possible theoretically. Also, the neatness of the shapes is misleading. The diagram is, however, trying to give some dynamic to the idea of one field of activity developing as others are more fully mastered; and thus less time is set aside for exercises which explicitly practise them. Teaching specific skills for specific cycle areas will, of course, be crucial, as will appropriate assessment formats. This does require careful classroom organisation. It is clear that time has to be made available to reinstate reading in the modern languages classroom. Silent reading for one period per week would pay enormous dividends for pupils' language learning: but active rather than passive reading; in other words, reading for a purpose, rather than simply to test comprehension. This requires careful

preparation of a range of materials and a structured system to monitor what work has been done. Swarbrick (1990) has made some useful suggestions on how to implement reading diaries and provide opportunities for pupils to exercise greater autonomy in choice of reading, etc. As beginners, pupils are encouraged to express appreciation of what they are reading, even if it is for the artwork, or style of cartoon. Such devices surely begin to help pupils to see reading as something they can involve themselves in on a personal level. Much more, however, needs to be done.

Conclusion

I began this paper by recounting the story of the crisis in confidence which has beset the teaching of reading to British primary school pupils. I claimed that the juxtaposition of phonic and psycholinguistic methods in teaching reading was a chronic symptom of the debate in language learning *per se* which opposes structure and grammar to more open "progressive" approaches; and in this, we have the age old tension of questioning the primacy of structure and meaning. I believe that if the debate on reading has had less impact on modern language teaching, it is because our understanding of the nature of communication and the role of reading in it is still underdeveloped. This seems to lead to a misrecognition of the role of reading in enhancing pupils' communicative competence in language. Clearly, the recently published National Curriculum Document (D.E.S. 1990) goes a long way in suggesting more imaginative approaches to reading than have hitherto been put forward; in particular, how reading can be used as a stimulus for work in other skill areas. Similarly, it is true that recent developments in IT (text-based software, the use of the concept keyboard, etc.) make the range and possibilities of working with written texts more appealing and accessible to the entire ability range. It must be recognised, however, that, just as in other skill areas, a clear developmental rationale for progress in using texts needs to form the foundation of any reading programme. This may well be process-based and evolve qualitatively during the course of language learning. A lot of work has to be done to develop these. Mary Glasgow is at present the only major British publisher producing a range of readily accessible readers with their Bibliobus/Lesekiste series, and their range of modern languages comics.

Such publications go a long way to meeting the needs of teachers and pupils at an intermediate and beginner level. They are, however, limited both qualitatively and quantitatively. There is an acute need for advanced readers that can be used for more extensive reading, with appropriate language and subject content. French publications do not always offer an obvious source of these, as very often they include cultural information and assumptions, which can prove a hindrance to pupils' understanding and appreciation. Teachers will always find new class activities to enliven language lessons. They cannot be expected, however, to write entire readers. Hopefully, this gap in the market will be filled in the near future, and reading in modern foreign languages can become a more integral part of pupils' learning.

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